

Tribal literature and Ecocriticism: Beyond the Scientific Paradigm

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In Rajasthan, people follow various religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Christianity etc. There are tribal people who practice 'nature worship' and follow their indigenous religions practices. Sharma has mentioned that "These communities in Rajasthan, such as the *Bhils*, *Minas*, *Garasias*, *Sahariyas*, and *Meenas*, exhibit a rich tapestry of cultural, social, and economic practices deeply intertwined with their natural environment and traditional ways of life. The *Bhils*, one of the largest tribal groups, are known for their historical connection to the land and their agricultural practices, which are heavily influenced by their reverence for nature and traditional ecological knowledge" (Sharma 29). Whereas, Bairwa and Agrawal has pointed, "The Meenas, another prominent tribe, have a unique social structure and customs, including the traditional panchayat system, which underscores their community-centric way of living and decision-making processes" (Bairwa and Agarwal 67). In his book, Mehta has pointed, "The Garasias, primarily inhabiting the forested regions, maintain a lifestyle that reflects their intimate relationship with the forest ecosystem, engaging in activities such as shifting cultivation and collection of forest produce" (Mehta 80). Meanwhile, Rathore points, "The Sahariyas, often considered one of the most marginalized tribes in Rajasthan, face significant challenges in terms of socio-economic development but continue to uphold their distinct cultural identity through their traditional crafts and rituals" (Rathore 55). These tribal communities' resilience and cultural richness contribute significantly to the diverse cultural landscape of Rajasthan. Their activities emerge from the very life of the masses. From gathering food to more sophisticated practices of religious, social and political life.

Tribal or Indigenous communities in Rajasthan, like the Bhils and the Minas, have a profound connection to nature, emphasizing living in harmony with the natural environment, which influences their agricultural practices, healthcare, and daily living. This paper aims to explore ecocriticism through the examination of selected indigenous literary texts and the philosophies of Indian aboriginal communities.

“The word “Indigenous” has originated from the Latin term ‘Indigena’ which implies ‘Sprung from the land’ or ‘to be born from’. The word ‘Indigenous’ also refers ‘gender’, ‘generation’ and ‘genesis.’ The word is also connected with origin, birth, and descent. Hence, the term ‘Indigenous’ denotes native, aboriginal, first nation, inborn, first to settle in a given territory” (Doley 27).

Later, Doley mentions “The word “Tribe” has originated in the 13th century and derived from the Latin ‘*tribus*’ (tribus = three, bhuour or bu = to be) which literally means ‘to be three’. It was used for identification among the three original tribes of Rome- the Tities, the Ramnes and the Luceres. Generally, in India, the term ‘tribe’ has been used to mean primitive or backward class, living in forests and hills, the original but underdeveloped inhabitants. The names used for identification of ‘tribal’ people are *janjati* (Scheduled tribes), *pahariya* (hill dwellers), *adivasi* (first dwellers), *vanjati* (forest caste), *adimjati* (primitive people), *vanvasi* (forest inhabitant)” (Doley 9). These are the terms commonly used to identify the tribe people or communities. From the above mentioned words that are used to denote the word ‘tribal’ though it is used in a prejudicial sense, it is obvious that the tribal groups of North Eastern India are the native, original or indigenous to the region.

A tribe is a group of people who share a language, traditions, habits, religion and moral rules and practices, and so on. A headman or boss usually leads them. As they come from the same biotic lineage and share the same sociocultural order, people in the same group are quite related to each other. There is a strong connection between them and the land and natural elements around it. They have their own language,

beliefs, and way of running their government and economy. They are always taking care of and passing on their traditional and family environments and ways of life. They know a lot about how to handle natural resources in a way that doesn't harm the environment. Tribes have their own ideas about how to grow based on their goals, values, and ways of doing things. For the purposes of this thesis, 'Indigenous' refers to the North East Indian tribe groups or people. It's better to call most tribal people 'indigenous people' instead of 'tribal people'. They say that the word 'tribal' means 'backward,' 'primitive,' or 'underdeveloped. Another reason for desiring to be referred to as indigenous is that tribal people exhibit similar traits to those possessed by the indigenous people of North East India. Hence, in this particular investigation, the term 'indigenous' is employed to refer to the tribal individuals or communities residing in North East India. Not all Indigenous individuals are necessarily tribal, and not all tribal individuals are always indigenous to the region. The usage of the phrase 'indigenous' instead of 'tribal' in this study should not be misunderstood. Both terms are used interchangeably because the majority of the tribal communities in North East India are native to and originated from the region they occupy. They are alternatively referred to as First Nations. However, the current study does not focus on the definition of the terms 'tribal' and 'indigenous', but rather it primarily focuses on their philosophy. Many tribal groups practice animism, believing that spirits inhabit natural objects and phenomena, a belief system integral to their rituals, festivals, and social structure. Tribal philosophy often emphasizes the importance of community and collectivism, with decision-making usually done collectively and a strong sense of mutual aid and cooperation.

Literature and Tribal Philosophy

Tribal philosophy and religion have been deeply explored and depicted in various works of literature, providing rich insights into the lives, beliefs, and practices of indigenous communities. These literary works often emphasize the connection to nature, animistic beliefs, community values, and the preservation of cultural traditions. For example, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo people's agricultural cycles and

rituals highlight their deep relationship with nature, portraying them as an integral part of the natural world. This connection to nature is a recurring theme in tribal literature, often depicted through agricultural practices, reverence for natural elements, and harmonious coexistence with the environment. Similarly, animism—the belief that spirits inhabit natural objects and phenomena—is frequently explored in literature. N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* reflects the spiritual beliefs of the Kiowa tribe, where nature and spirits play a crucial role in the protagonist's journey, illustrating how these spiritual beliefs shape the community's rituals, festivals, and daily life.

Tribal literature also frequently emphasizes the importance of community and collectivism, central to the social structures and decision-making processes of indigenous communities. For instance, in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, the interconnected lives of the Ojibwe community members illustrate the strong sense of collective identity and support within the tribe, emphasizing mutual aid and cooperation as fundamental values. The preservation and transmission of cultural traditions are critical themes in tribal literature, with authors often focusing on storytelling, rituals, and the passing down of knowledge from one generation to the next. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* delves into the importance of traditional stories and ceremonies in healing and maintaining cultural identity among the Laguna Pueblo people, highlighting how these cultural practices are vital for the community's resilience and continuity.

Portrayal of Challenges and Tribal Literature

Many works of tribal literature also address the challenges faced by indigenous communities, such as colonization, displacement, and cultural assimilation, often highlighting the resilience and adaptability of tribal people in preserving their identity and traditions. In *The Round House*, Louise Erdrich depicts the protagonist's fight for justice, reflecting the broader struggle of Native American communities to protect their rights and heritage, thus emphasizing resilience and the fight for justice as central themes. These literary works provide valuable perspectives on

tribal philosophy and religion, illustrating how indigenous communities navigate their beliefs, traditions, and challenges in a changing world.

Eco criticism in Tribal Philosophy and Literature

Eco criticism in tribal philosophy and literature is a burgeoning field of scholarly inquiry that scrutinizes the intricate relationships between indigenous communities and their natural environments, revealing a deep-seated ecological consciousness inherent in tribal cultures. According to environmentalist David Suzuki, the tribal ethical idea lies in the way they treat nature and natural phenomena. They treat “river as one of veins of land, not potential irrigation water, mountain as a deity not a pile of ore, the forest as sacred grove not as timber, the species as biological kin not resources and earth as a mother not opportunity” (David 9).

Tribal literature frequently underscores a profound symbiosis with nature, portraying humans and the environment as interdependent entities. This ecological worldview is compellingly illustrated in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, where the agricultural cycles and rituals of the Igbo people exemplify their deep-seated harmony with the natural world, reflecting an intrinsic ecological balance. At a time when ecological degradation and deforestation have taken place at an alarming rate throughout the world, the indigenous (tribal) religious worldview presents an ecological framework for the concrete manifestation of environmental conservation and sustainability. Similarly, N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* delves into the spiritual odyssey of a Native American man, encapsulating the Kiowa tribe’s animistic beliefs and veneration of nature, where the landscape itself emerges as a spiritually significant entity. Their traditional religious beliefs and practices help them in the prevention of destruction of trees, plants or natural resources. One of the important “objectives behind nature worship and plants used in religion is that it is always connected with conservation and utilization of nature in the most sustainable manner.

In the corpus of tribal literature, the environment transcends its role as a mere setting to become an active participant in the narrative, profoundly influencing and being influenced by the community’s cultural and spiritual

practices. Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* exemplifies this dynamic, depicting the intertwined lives of the Ojibwe community and emphasizing their collective identity and symbiotic relationship with the land, where natural elements are deeply embedded in their cultural rituals and narratives. Since centuries the indigenous (tribal) communities of North East India have developed a cultural mechanism to ensure the continuity of natural resources. They learned that human in the world is possible only when all living creature like birds, animals, plants, trees, rivers, mountain etc. continue to exist equally along with humans. All the things in the world are place on the same level. The idea of interdependence and not of domination is the message shows by Indigenous (tribal) communities through their religious worldview and the ways of living.

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* further elaborates on this theme, highlighting the significance of traditional stories and ceremonies in the healing process and the preservation of cultural identity among the Laguna Pueblo people, thereby illustrating how ecological knowledge and cultural practices are inextricably linked to foster resilience and continuity.

Moreover, Eco criticism in tribal literature often grapples with the deleterious impacts of colonization and environmental degradation on indigenous communities. Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* poignantly depicts the protagonist's quest for justice amidst environmental and cultural threats, symbolizing the broader struggle of Native American communities to safeguard their rights and heritage against external exploitation. This recurrent motif of resilience and adaptability amidst ecological and cultural adversities underscores the imperative for a sustainable and respectful relationship with the natural world.

Examining these literary works through an 'eco critical lens' enables scholars to attain a nuanced understanding of indigenous environmental philosophies, offering invaluable insights into sustainable living and environmental ethics. Tribal literature thus emerges as a vital testament to the ecological wisdom and spiritual connection to nature that characterizes indigenous cultures, advocating for the preservation of

both natural and cultural landscapes in the face of contemporary challenges.

In fact, establishing a new philosophy or philosophical school is very challenging and ambitious. It required path-breaking inquiries into the existing system and method. Indigenous (tribal) communities of North East India do not claim of making such path breaking inquiries into their contention or they do demand to have a new philosophy. However, they claim for defending the thought and ideas that made sense to philosophical thinking and that can be called 'tribal philosophy'. For the tribal society of N. E India, "the philosophy is expressed orally since print was not part of their tradition. Such expression is found abundance in folktales, folklores and other forms of traditional practices that constitute a form of life-giving meanings to their existence.

Generally, it is the elders of the community who mastered such traditions and narrated verbally to the younger only. In all these, 'beliefs' is an important factor because it is through 'beliefs' that certain forms of an injunction are laid and legitimizes by the collective conscience of the community. According to Indigenous tribal people, their worldview does not only consisting of beliefs, values or sentiments. Their worldview and their knowledge are the result of practical engagement in everyday life and are continuously reinforced by the experience of trial and error. Their vision is the outcome of many generations of reasoning and experiment and since its failure has immediate consequences for its practitioner. Their thought process is tested in the rigorous laboratory of survival.

Indigenous philosophy is developed from traditional beliefs and practices like- Myths, legends, folklore, songs, poetry, storytelling etc. Like any other important aspect of life, these conventional beliefs have also a significant role in tribal communities. Their traditional beliefs work as a scripture among them. They reflects upon traditional values of the past to make sense of the moral changes of the present.

Conclusion

In examining the cultural and intellectual life of tribal communities, it becomes evident that myth, symbol, folklore, and poetry hold a similar status to history, literature, mathematics, and science in more industrialized societies. These traditional beliefs and practices play a crucial role in shaping the rational thinking of these communities. Thus, it is inappropriate to dismiss their traditional ideas as unscientific, meaningless, or nonsensical. Instead, these ideas operate within their own set of norms and criteria for acceptability. Consequently, tribal knowledge systems can be described as neither scientific nor unscientific but rather as a scientific, existing outside the binary classification of Western scientific rationality.

These conventional ideas form the essence of the worldview of the respective society, and understanding this worldview is essential for comprehending the philosophy of tribal people. While the systems and structures within these communities may initially appear strange or exotic to outsiders, a deeper exploration and interpretation of their various layers of meaning reveal rich sources of information and knowledge.

Therefore, it is erroneous to categorize tribal knowledge as primitive, savage, or under-developed. Instead, it represents an alternative order of reason and rationality. The traditional beliefs and practices of tribal communities embody a sophisticated and coherent system of understanding the world, one that is distinct from but equally valid as the scientific paradigms prevalent in modern industrialized societies.

By acknowledging the complexity and legitimacy of tribal ways of knowing, scholars can gain valuable insights into the diverse ways in which human societies comprehend and interact with their environments. This perspective fosters a more inclusive and holistic approach to the study of human knowledge, recognizing the richness and diversity of intellectual traditions across cultures.

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